

Classic Poetry Series

Louise Bogan
- poems -

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Louise Bogan(August 11, 1897 – February 4, 1970)

Born in Livermore Falls, Maine, in 1897. She attended Boston Girls' Latin School and spent one year at Boston University. She married in 1916 and was widowed in 1920. In 1925, she married her second husband, the poet Raymond Holden, whom she divorced in 1937. Her poems were published in the *New Republic*, the *Nation*, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, *Scribner's* and *Atlantic Monthly*. For thirty-eight years, she reviewed poetry for *The New Yorker*.

Bogan found the confessional poetry of Robert Lowell and John Berryman distasteful and self-indulgent. With the poets whose work she admired, however, such as Theodore Roethke, she was extremely supportive and encouraging. She was reclusive and disliked talking about herself, and for that reason details are scarce regarding her private life. The majority of her poetry was written in the earlier half of her life when she published *Body of This Death* (1923) and *Dark Summer* (1929) and *The Sleeping Fury* (1937). She subsequently published volumes of her collected verse, and *The Blue Estuaries: Poems 1923-1968*, an overview of her life's work in poetry. Her ability is unique in its strict adherence to lyrical forms, while maintaining a high emotional pitch: she was preoccupied with exploring the perpetual disparity of heart and mind. She died in New York City in 1970.

A Tale

This youth too long has heard the break
Of waters in a land of change.
He goes to see what suns can make
From soil more indurate and strange.

He cuts what holds his days together
And shuts him in, as lock on lock:
The arrowed vane announcing weather,
The tripping racket of a clock;

Seeking, I think, a light that waits
Still as a lamp upon a shelf, --
A land with hills like rocky gates
Where no sea leaps upon itself.

But he will find that nothing dares
To be enduring, save where, south
Of hidden deserts, torn fire glares
On beauty with a rusted mouth, --

Where something dreadful and another
Look quietly upon each other.

Louise Bogan

Betrothed

You have put your two hands upon me, and your mouth,
You have said my name as a prayer.

Here where trees are planted by the water
I have watched your eyes, cleansed from regret,
And your lips, closed over all that love cannot say,

My mother remembers the agony of her womb
And long years that seemed to promise more than this.
She says, "You do not love me,
You do not want me,
You will go away."

In the country whereto I go
I shall not see the face of my friend
Nor her hair the color of sunburnt grasses;
Together we shall not find
The land on whose hills bends the new moon
In air traversed of birds.

What have I thought of love?
I have said, "It is beauty and sorrow."
I have thought that it would bring me lost delights, and splendor
As a wind out of old time . . .

But there is only the evening here,
And the sound of willows
Now and again dipping their long oval leaves in the water.

Louise Bogan

Cassandra

To me, one silly task is like another.
I bare the shambling tricks of lust and pride.
This flesh will never give a child its mother,—
Song, like a wing, tears through my breast, my side,
And madness chooses out my voice again,
Again. I am the chosen no hand saves:
The shrieking heaven lifted over men,
Not the dumb earth, wherein they set their graves.

Louise Bogan

Chanson Un Peu Naïve

What body can be ploughed,
Sown, and broken yearly?
But she would not die, she vowed,
But she has, nearly.

Sing, heart sing;
Call and carol clearly.

And, since she could not die,
Care would be a feather,
A film over the eye
Of two that lie together.

Fly, song, fly,
Break your little tether.

So from strength concealed
She makes her pretty boast:
Plain is a furrow healed
And she may love you most.

Cry, song, cry,
And hear your crying lost.

Louise Bogan

Epitaph For A Romantic Woman

She has attained the permanence
She dreamed of, where old stones lie sunning.
Untended stalks blow over her
Even and swift, like young men running.

Always in the heart she loved
Others had lived, -- she heard their laughter.
She lies where none has lain before,
Where certainly none will follow after.

Louise Bogan

Juan's Song

When beauty breaks and falls asunder
I feel no grief for it, but wonder.
When love, like a frail shell, lies broken,
I keep no chip of it for token.
I never had a man for friend
Who did not know that love must end.
I never had a girl for lover
Who could discern when love was over.
What the wise doubt, the fool believes--
Who is it, then, that love deceives?

Louise Bogan

Knowledge

Now that I know
How passion warms little
Of flesh in the mould,
And treasure is brittle,--

I'll lie here and learn
How, over their ground
Trees make a long shadow
And a light sound.

Louise Bogan

Last Hill In A Vista

Come, let us tell the weeds in ditches
How we are poor, who once had riches,
And lie out in the sparse and sodden
Pastures that the cows have trodden,
The while an autumn night seals down
The comforts of the wooden town.

Come, let us counsel some cold stranger
How we sought safety, but loved danger.
So, with stiff walls about us, we
Chose this more fragile boundary:
Hills, where light poplars, the firm oak,
Loosen into a little smoke.

Louise Bogan

Leave-Taking

I do not know where either of us can turn
Just at first, waking from the sleep of each other.
I do not know how we can bear
The river struck by the gold plummet of the moon,
Or many trees shaken together in the darkness.
We shall wish not to be alone
And that love were not dispersed and set free—
Though you defeat me,
And I be heavy upon you.

But like earth heaped over the heart
Is love grown perfect.
Like a shell over the beat of life
Is love perfect to the last.
So let it be the same
Whether we turn to the dark or to the kiss of another;
Let us know this for leavetaking,
That I may not be heavy upon you,
That you may blind me no more.

Louise Bogan

Man Alone

It is yourself you seek
In a long rage,
Scanning through light and darkness
Mirrors, the page,

Where should reflected be
Those eyes and that thick hair,
That passionate look, that laughter.
You should appear

Within the book, or doubled,
Freed, in the silvered glass;
Into all other bodies
Yourself should pass.

The glass does not dissolve;
Like walls the mirrors stand;
The printed page gives back
Words by another hand.

And your infatuate eye
Meets not itself below;
Strangers lie in your arms
As I lie now.

Louise Bogan

Medusa

I had come to the house, in a cave of trees,
Facing a sheer sky.
Everything moved, -- a bell hung ready to strike,
Sun and reflection wheeled by.

When the bare eyes were before me
And the hissing hair,
Held up at a window, seen through a door.
The stiff bald eyes, the serpents on the forehead
Formed in the air.

This is a dead scene forever now.
Nothing will ever stir.
The end will never brighten it more than this,
Nor the rain blur.

The water will always fall, and will not fall,
And the tipped bell make no sound.
The grass will always be growing for hay
Deep on the ground.

And I shall stand here like a shadow
Under the great balanced day,
My eyes on the yellow dust, that was lifting in the wind,
And does not drift away.

Louise Bogan

Men Loved Wholly Beyond Wisdom

Men loved wholly beyond wisdom
Have the staff without the banner.
Like a fire in a dry thicket
Rising within women's eyes
Is the love men must return.
Heart, so subtle now, and trembling,
What a marvel to be wise.,
To love never in this manner!
To be quiet in the fern
Like a thing gone dead and still,
Listening to the prisoned cricket
Shake its terrible dissembling
Music in the granite hill.

Louise Bogan

Portrait

She has no need to fear the fall
Of harvest from the laddered reach
Of orchards, nor the tide gone ebbing
From the steep beach.

Nor hold to pain's effrontery
Her body's bulwark, stern and savage,
Nor be a glass, where to forsee
Another's ravage.

What she has gathered, and what lost,
She will not find to lose again.
She is possessed by time, who once
Was loved by men.

Louise Bogan

Roman Fountain

Up from the bronze, I saw
Water without a flaw
Rush to its rest in air,
Reach to its rest, and fall.

Bronze of the blackest shade,
An element man-made,
Shaping upright the bare
Clear gouts of water in air.

O, as with arm and hammer,
Still it is good to strive
To beat out the image whole,
To echo the shout and stammer
When full-gushed waters, alive,
Strike on the fountain's bowl
After the air of summer.

Louise Bogan

Solitary Observation Brought Back From A Sojourn In Hell

At midnight tears
Run in your ears.

Louise Bogan

Song For The Last Act

Now that I have your face by heart, I look
Less at its features than its darkening frame
Where quince and melon, yellow as young flame,
Lie with quilled dahlias and the shepherd's crook.
Beyond, a garden, There, in insolent ease
The lead and marble figures watch the show
Of yet another summer loath to go
Although the scythes hang in the apple trees.

Now that I have your face by heart, I look.

Now that I have your voice by heart, I read
In the black chords upon a dulling page
Music that is not meant for music's cage,
Whose emblems mix with words that shake and bleed.
The staves are shuttled over with a stark
Unprinted silence. In a double dream
I must spell out the storm, the running stream.
The beat's too swift. The notes shift in the dark.

Now that I have your voice by heart, I read.

Now that I have your heart by heart, I see
The wharves with their great ships and architraves;
The rigging and the cargo and the slaves
On a strange beach under a broken sky.
O not departure, but a voyage done!
The bales stand on the stone; the anchor weeps
Its red rust downward, and the long vine creeps
Beside the salt herb, in the lengthening sun.

Now that I have your heart by heart, I see.

Louise Bogan

Sonnet

Since you would claim the sources of my thought
Recall the meshes whence it sprang unlimed,
The reedy traps which other hands have times
To close upon it. Conjure up the hot
Blaze that it cleared so cleanly, or the snow
Devised to strike it down. It will be free.
Whatever nets draw in to prison me
At length your eyes must turn to watch it go.

My mouth, perhaps, may learn one thing too well,
My body hear no echo save its own,
Yet will the desperate mind, maddened and proud,
Seek out the storm, escape the bitter spell
That we obey, strain to the wind, be thrown
Straight to its freedom in the thunderous cloud

Louise Bogan

Statue And Birds

Here, in the withered arbor, like the arrested wind,
Straight sides, carven knees,
Stands the statue, with hands flung out in alarm
Or remonstrances.

Over the lintel sway the woven bracts of the vine
In a pattern of angles.
The quill of the fountain falters, woods rake on the sky
Their brusque tangles.

The birds walk by slowly, circling the marble girl,
The golden quails,
The pheasants, closed up in their arrowy wings,
Dragging their sharp tails.

The inquietudes of the sap and of the blood are spent.
What is forsaken will rest.
But her heel is lifted,—she would flee,—the whistle of the birds
Fails on her breast.

Louise Bogan

Tears In Sleep

All night the cocks crew, under a moon like day,
And I, in the cage of sleep, on a stranger's breast,
Shed tears, like a task not to be put away---
In the false light, false grief in my happy bed,
A labor of tears, set against joy's undoing.
I would not wake at your word, I had tears to say.
I clung to the bars of the dream and they were said,
And pain's derisive hand had given me rest
From the night giving off flames, and the dark renewing.

Louise Bogan

The Alchemist

I burned my life, that I might find
A passion wholly of the mind,
Thought divorced from eye and bone,
Ecstasy come to breath alone.
I broke my life, to seek relief
From the flawed light of love and grief.

With mounting beat the utter fire
Charred existence and desire.
It died low, ceased its sudden thresh.
I had found unmysterious flesh --
Not the mind's avid substance -- still
Passionate beyond the will.

Louise Bogan

The Crossed Apple

I've come to give you fruit from out my orchard,
Of wide report.
I have trees there that bear me many apples.
Of every sort:

Clear, streaked; red and russet; green and golden;
Sour and sweet.
This apple's from a tree yet un beholden,
Where two kinds meet, -

So that this side is red without a dapple,
And this side's hue
Is clear and snowy. It's a lovely apple.
It is for you.

Within are five black pips as big as peas,
As you will find,
Potent to breed you five great apple trees
Of varying kind:

To breed you wood for fire, leaves for shade,
Apples for sauce.
Oh, this is a good apple for a maid,
It is a cross,

Fine on the finer, so the flesh is tight,
And grained like silk.
Sweet Burning gave the red side, and the white
Is Meadow Milk.

Eat it, and you will taste more than the fruit:
The blossom, too,
The sun, the air, the darkness at the root,
The rain, the dew,

The earth we came to, and the time we flee,
The fire and the breast.
I claim the white part, maiden, that's for me.
You take the rest.

Louise Bogan

The Dream

O God, in the dream the terrible horse began
To paw at the air, and make for me with his blows,
Fear kept for thirty-five years poured through his mane,
And retribution equally old, or nearly, breathed through his nose.

Coward complete, I lay and wept on the ground
When some strong creature appeared, and leapt for the rein.
Another woman, as I lay half in a swoon
Leapt in the air, and clutched at the leather and chain.

Give him, she said, something of yours as a charm.
Throw him, she said, some poor thing you alone claim.
No, no, I cried, he hates me; he is out for harm,
And whether I yield or not, it is all the same.

But, like a lion in a legend, when I flung the glove
Pulled from my sweating, my cold right hand;
The terrible beast, that no one may understand,
Came to my side, and put down his head in love.

Louise Bogan

The Frightened Man

In fear of the rich mouth
I kissed the thin,--
Even that was a trap
To snare me in.

Even she, so long
The frail, the scentless,
Is become strong,
And proves relentless.

O, forget her praise,
And how I sought her
Through a hazardous maze
By shafted water.

Louise Bogan

To A Dead Lover

The dark is thrown
Back from the brightness, like hair
Cast over a shoulder.
I am alone,

Four years older;
Like the chairs and the walls
Which I once watched brighten
With you beside me. I was to waken
Never like this, whatever came or was taken.

The stalk grows, the year beats on the wind.
Apples come, and the month for their fall.
The bark spreads, the roots tighten.
Though today be the last
Or tomorrow all,
You will not mind.

That I may not remember
Does not matter.
I shall not be with you again.
What we knew, even now
Must scatter
And be ruined, and blow
Like dust in the rain.

You have been dead a long season
And have less than desire
Who were lover with lover;
And I have life—that old reason
To wait for what comes,
To leave what is over.

Louise Bogan

To Be Sung On The Water

Beautiful, my delight,
Pass, as we pass the wave.
Pass, as the mottled night
Leaves what it cannot save,
Scattering dark and bright.

Beautiful, pass and be
Less than the guiltless shade
To which our vows were said;
Less than the sound of the oar
To which our vows were made, -
Less than the sound of its blade
Dipping the stream once more.

Louise Bogan

Women

Women have no wilderness in them,
They are provident instead,
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
To eat dusty bread.

They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,
They do not hear
Snow water going down under culverts
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,
They stiffen, when they should bend.
They use against themselves that benevolence
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
Their love is an eager meaninglessness
Too tense, or too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them
A shout and a cry.
As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills
They should let it go by.

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Louise Bogan

Words For Departure

Nothing was remembered, nothing forgotten.
When we awoke, wagons were passing on the warm summer pavements,
The window-sills were wet from rain in the night,
Birds scattered and settled over chimneypots
As among grotesque trees.

Nothing was accepted, nothing looked beyond.
Slight-voiced bells separated hour from hour,
The afternoon sifted coolness
And people drew together in streets becoming deserted.
There was a moon, and light in a shop-front,
And dusk falling like precipitous water.

Hand clasped hand
Forehead still bowed to forehead--
Nothing was lost, nothing possessed
There was no gift nor denial.

2
I have remembered you.
You were not the town visited once,
Nor the road falling behind running feet.

You were as awkward as flesh
And lighter than frost or ashes.

You were the rind,
And the white-juiced apple,
The song, and the words waiting for music.

3
You have learned the beginning;
Go from mine to the other.

Be together; eat, dance, despair,
Sleep, be threatened, endure.
You will know the way of that.

But at the end, be insolent;

Be absurd--strike the thing short off;
Be mad--only do not let talk
Wear the bloom from silence.

And go away without fire or lantern
Let there be some uncertainty about your departure.

Louise Bogan

Zone

We have struck the regions wherein we are keel or reef.
The wind breaks over us,
And against high sharp angles almost splits into words,
And these are of fear or grief.

Like a ship, we have struck expected latitudes
Of the universe, in March.
Through one short segment's arch
Of the zodiac's round
We pass,
Thinking: Now we hear
What we heard last year,
And bear the wind's rude touch
And its ugly sound
Equally with so much
We have learned how to bear.

Louise Bogan